

VOTE - Voter Outreach Through Education Washington Secretary of State

WASHINGTON STATE CURRICULUM GRADES 8-12 STUDENT HANDOUT, LESSON 6

THEME: MAKING YOUR POINT, ASKING YOUR QUESTION

"I am only one; but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; I will not refuse to do the something I can do."
(Helen Keller)

"Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can make a difference; indeed, it is the only thing that has."
(Margaret Mead)

Casting an informed vote is one key ingredient of maintaining our democracy. There is yet another. There are those times when a citizen needs to ask a question of, or express an opinion to, an elected official. This activity will help facilitate your efforts to keep connected with those who represent you in government so that collectively we can have the "consent of the governed" envisioned in the Declaration of Independence. We must do our part AFTER the election too. One of the most common regrets expressed by elected officials, at all levels, is that their constituents, those they represent, do not regularly convey their wishes or opinions. Here are some tips and resources on how to keep connected with officials and the "body politic" between elections.

ACTIVITY:

As easily as dialing (800) 562-6000, you can express an opinion or seek information at the Legislative Information Center Hotline. These helpful people can take your message and communicate it to the Governor or to your state district legislator. Don't know your district? No problem; from your address the operators can determine that for you. Want information or materials about a bill or about your Representative or Senator's position on an issue? This is the number you can call. When the Legislature is in session, this resource is available Monday through Friday 8am to 8pm, Saturday 9am to 1pm. During the interim (between sessions) you can call Monday through Friday 8am to 12pm and 1 to 4:30pm.

Phone calls direct to the offices of elected officials are an option, as are letters and electronic correspondence (email & fax). There are several easy ways to access the necessary information. Go to www.vote.wa.gov. In the upper left page, find "Elections Menu" and scroll your cursor down to "Contacts." When the menu appears to the right of "Contacts," click on "Elected Officials." You will find the names of our state's delegation to Congress in Washington D.C. listed under "U.S. House of Representatives" and "United States Senators," as well as the names of the statewide elected officials for Washington. Clicking on any name instantly brings you to all the information you need to communicate your views or questions. Let's try one!

Following the directions above, find our state's two United States Senators, click on each name, and answer this question:

QUESTION:

1. What are the phone numbers, for the offices of each of the two U.S. Senators?

If you wish to contact your Representative to the State Legislature in Olympia, simply go to www.vote.wa.gov. In the upper left page, find "Elections Menu" and scroll your cursor down to "Other Resources." When the menu appears to the right, move your mouse to "State Legislature" and click. This brings you to the "Washington State Legislature" home page. From there you can go straight to contact information for your district's State Representatives or Senator.

Quite often citizens do not know what state legislative district they are in. This information is a sort of "key" that puts you in touch with your correct official and determines for which elective offices you can vote. The number of your legislative district in this state is easily obtained, so let's try that first.

While at the "Washington State Legislature" home page (see directions in the preceding paragraph), look at the green buttons on the left and click on "Find Out Who Represents You." Next, you can either enter your 9 digit zip code and click "Find my District," or enter your address and click "Find my District." You will see not only your state legislative district number but also the names of your district's state Representatives and Senator. Click on the name of one of your state legislative district delegates and you will find the contact information you need. Now YOU try it! While on this site, answer the following questions:

QUESTIONS:

2. What is the number of your state legislative district?
3. What are the names of your state legislative district's two Representatives and one Senator?
4. What is the mailing address in Olympia AND email address for the State Senator from your district? (Hint: Click on the name of your State Senator to find this information.)

At times you might prefer to access your officials through their Internet web sites. One incredibly useful source of information and tool for communicating with your elected officials at any level is "Access Washington." This next activity will take you there and then ask you to find some information.

Go to www.vote.wa.gov. In the upper left page, find "Elections Menu" and scroll your cursor down to "Other Resources." When the menu appears to the right of "Other Resources", move your mouse to "Access Washington" and click. On the left of this page click "Government." The list you now see gives you the option of Federal, State and Local Government web sites. "Federal" will again connect you to Washington's Congressional Delegation; "State" will again show you information on statewide elected officials and state legislative delegates. What does "Local" present? Let's find out!

Click on "Local" and you see "Counties" and "Cities and Towns" as options. For practice, click on "Counties" and then click on the county in which YOU live. Answer the following questions:

QUESTION:

5. What is the name and contact address (email or postal) of one of your county's leaders (council or commission members)?

Congratulations! Once you have decided to communicate your views or questions, you know how to find the information for doing so. When you do, consider the following suggestions for expressing your views in an effective manner:

Suggestions:

1. Writing to newspapers. To express your views to your fellow citizens through "Letters to the Editor," consult the editorial page of your local newspaper for instructions and mailing addresses. Generally, to be considered for print, such letters must:
 - Be confined to 250 words;
 - Include your name and phone number for verification purposes;
 - Can be emailed or mailed;
 - Should be double-spaced for editing purposes.
2. Writing to elected officials. Personal letters can be very important in speaking for or against a particular bill or issue. Postcards are also effective for quick sharing of your view. Here are some guidelines to help you write an effective letter to an elected official:
 - Write your letter carefully, type if possible, and check for correct spelling and grammar;
 - Be sure the official's name and title is correct;
 - Identify the bill or issue and your specific purpose for writing;
 - Tell what you believe should be done and ask for a specific action if possible;
 - Localize your letter, explaining what the bill means to your community, campus or you;
 - Be as specific as you can be and rely on your personal experience as evidence;
 - State whether or not you want a reply and the official's current position on the issue;
 - Sign (and print/type) your name and provide your home address and phone number on both the letter itself and the envelope.
3. Calling your elected officials. Telephoning an official is a legitimate and important method of personal lobbying and here are some tips:
 - Call your official at his/her office. Identify yourself by name and address;
 - Speak with a secretary or staff member if necessary;
 - Identify the bill by name or number or clearly identify the issue of your concern;
 - Briefly state your position and how you want the official to vote or proceed;
 - Ask for the official's current position on the issue;
 - Thank that person (it may be a spokesperson) for spending time on the phone with you;
 - If you get voice mail, leave a succinct message and whether or not you want a return call.